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## Factors affecting international student adjustment in the U.S.

### Abstract

The international student population is a highly visible and significant subset of the student body of many American colleges and universities. Students from other countries have been coming to the United States since 1784 (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977; Meloni, 1986), and the numbers continue to increase substantially. For example, the international student enrollment in 1930 was 9,643 students; by 1953 that number had risen to 33,647 due to the postwar efforts to help rebuild and develop other countries through direct financial aid and education (Meloni, 1986). As of 1986, the number of international students enrolled in the U.S. is almost 340,000 and represents more than 180 countries and territories of the world (Meloni, 1986; Reiniche, 1986).

FACTORS AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT  
ADJUSTMENT IN THE U.S.

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by

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## **Factors Affecting International Student Adjustment in the United States**

The international student population is a highly visible and significant subset of the student body of many American colleges and universities. Students from other countries have been coming to the United States since 1784 (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977; Meloni, 1986), and the numbers continue to increase substantially. For example, the international student enrollment in 1930 was 9,643 students; by 1953 that number had risen to 33,647 due to the postwar efforts to help rebuild and develop other countries through direct financial aid and education (Meloni, 1986). As of 1986, the number of international students enrolled in the U.S. is almost 340,000 and represents more than 180 countries and territories of the world (Meloni, 1986; Reiniche, 1986).

The diversity of these countries is represented by the diversity of the students. These factors, combined with the experience of being an international student in the U.S., can lead to a difficult and unsettling period of adjustment. These students often face long periods of isolation, loneliness, and pressure. In addition to their emotional and sometimes physical

discomforts, they also face constant pressures by their families and sponsors to succeed (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977).

An international student in the U.S. is an individual in a strange new environment. Each student's needs are individual and vary according to country, age, educational level, religion, personality, interests, and goals (Reiniche, 1986). International students are eager to learn from their new environments and eager to share their experiences. These students represent a rich resource for development by the American higher education system.

International students are faced with many serious problems. The broad term for these problems is "culture shock," and few are immune to its effects (Reiniche, 1986). Problems of culture shock combined with varying student abilities can produce problems which include: the use of the English language, maintenance of adequate finances, finding supportive faculty, and the use of other facilities available to assist them during their stay in the U.S.

There are many reasons why American colleges and universities, welcome qualified international students. International students on American campuses have been

recognized for their contributions to good relations between the U.S. and the rest of the world. They expose American students to new cultural values, and they represent economic support to institutions of higher education (Reiniche, 1986).

The international students who study on American campuses are not only allowed to pursue their academic goals, but they also receive a different perception of America which can be shared when they return to their native lands. This, in turn, also influences their current education and future international involvement. From this education, the students' home countries can achieve greater economic, social, and political development (University of Northern Iowa Institute, handbook, 1989). Acquisition of education can become a significant factor in cross-cultural relations and reduction in the level of international tensions (Reiniche, 1986).

Although students from abroad are generally welcomed by American institutions of higher education, sometimes it is with mixed feelings. Most Americans sense that the international students are culturally different, but they are not exactly sure what these differences are. This uncertainty can be due to the

lack of Americans' knowledge about the international students' cultural background (Hendricks, 1977; Reiniche, 1986).

If it is the goal of the institution to achieve the highest value of experience and to minimize problems, the institutions admitting international students must provide adequate services for them (Roark, 1980; Dalili, 1982). U.S. institutions allocate more resources than other developed countries for international student services to handle the increased number of students on the campus (Hendricks, 1977). As a result of the U.S. attention to, and services for, international students, many developing countries use U.S. institutions of higher education as their main training ground. Therefore, international student enrollments are likely to increase. The need to increase attention to the attitudes, frustrations, and needs of the international student will also continue as the U.S. shares its educational resources (Meloni, 1986). The needs of international students for academic and career advising, plus assistance in adjusting to a new culture, are great.

The purpose of this paper is to address several issues in international student services: adaptation



to the educational system, learning circumstances, international student adjustment, role of college/university advisors, and career counseling/return adjustment.

### **Adaptation to the Educational System**

Obtaining a degree from an American institution of higher education is highly desired by many persons from many countries. They feel that it will be highly beneficial to their future if they come to the U.S. to study. However, they may choose their institutions for study in some invalid ways. While many students will base their choice on the reputation of a given school in a foreign country, others rely on the opinions of friends and relatives (Meloni, 1986). More effective advisement is needed so that these students can increase their chances of success by making the best possible choice of an institution. They are often drawn from the intellectual elite of their countries and have high levels of determination and motivation to succeed (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1986).

Students who take up temporary residence to study in the U.S. spend much time, money, and effort to

pursue this advanced training in what are often difficult circumstances in a foreign land and culture (Reinicke, 1986). finance of studies is often the most difficult part of a foreign student's stay. Though the U.S. government requires that all incoming foreign students have enough money to last a year, many of them begin to develop financial difficulties after the first year (Sedlacek & Boyer, 1986). Increasing the impact of the U.S. government's policies are the restrictions placed on these students by their own governments. The limiting of students' use of funds, combined with the U.S. governments' regulations inhibiting overseas students from working, means that financial problems will continue to overshadow other problems (Eddy, 1972; UNI Institute, handbook, 1989).

An important recent shift in the countries having the largest student populations in the U.S. is that students from developing countries now constitute about 50 percent of all foreign students in the U.S. (Roark, 1980). Another significant change in the international student population is its rate of growth; it has more than doubled at the graduate level in the last ten years (Scully, 1985). The international student population is now expanding most rapidly at the

undergraduate level, which comprises more than half the students (Eddy, 1972; Hendrick & Skinner, 1977).

A better understanding of why so many students, especially undergraduates, come to the U.S. may be gained from a look at the majors in which they most frequently enroll: 78,000 in engineering; 47,320 in business and management; 21,830, in social sciences, and 21,570, in natural sciences (Scully, 1985). The courses of instruction selected by international students reflect more than just their countries' needs; they also reflect the students' hopes for their future in their country. Helping the students to match the most relevant curriculum to their long-term goals is an area of advisement with which American colleges and universities need to become more concerned. Matching a program of study with a chosen career field is not enough. International students must be able to function within their course curriculum and find it relevant to their lives and future vocations.

### **Learning Circumstances**

The diversity of American institutions of higher education quite frequently is a shock to international

students. Many of them come from countries that have educational systems which are nationalized and centralized in control. In their countries, students entering higher education are better prepared because they have been trained along a continuum which is their standardized educational program. The curriculum objectives, content, and the teaching methods used are comparable from one level to the next, and students progress along this continuum with minimal difficulty (Crano, 1986). Success for the international student in an institution of higher education in the U.S. can become a more attainable goal if that student's previous secondary schooling coincides with, or at least overlaps, American secondary schooling (Payind, 1979).

The international student who is accepted into a course of study at a college or university in the U.S. is expected to have basically the same kinds of knowledge as his American contemporaries. This expectation from the U.S. institutions, in most cases, impacts the course structure. This expectation not only affects how the curriculum is taught but can have adverse results for the international student, including receiving personally insufficient information

in classroom settings. The professor and other students have to reorganize their own cultural bias or norms in order to compensate for this lack of information.

Many international students become frustrated, because they struggle to maintain the necessary tools for achievement when they were high achievers in their native lands. The excitement of gaining an education in the U.S. can turn to upset when the students discover that their hard-earned education (academic credit) in their own country is not valid or relevant in U.S. colleges and universities (Crano, 1986; Eddy, 1972). Credits from one country which are not valid in another, and preparation programs which lose their preparation value, can cause international students to raise a significant question about their studies in the U.S.: Will this curriculum and program of study I am following be relevant and valid when I return to my country?

The fear of incongruence between course-work and work experience can be reinforced if students are faced with long periods of maladjustment to an unfamiliar culture (Payind, 1979). The sooner this period of discomfort is over, the sooner the student will be able

to judge objectively the relevance of his/her education to future career choice.

### **International Student Adjustment**

The mass media have a heavy impact on knowledge dissemination throughout the world. International students, as a result of this media influence, often arrive in the U.S. with predetermined attitudes which are either positive or negative (Delili, 1982). It would appear that Americans are not engaging in direct personal communication with international students. When international students perceive that they are guests in the U.S., it is hard for them to be aggressive or to expect to form close friendships (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1987). A continuing lack of contact with U.S. citizens can lead to a high level of alienation for the international students. This is one reason why the basic cultural attitudes of these students change little after two or three years in this country. They do appear to become more open-minded and place greater value on knowledge, but the career goals and attitudes toward their home country are fairly resistant to change (Crano, 1986).

Living in a different society is, for an international student, a continuing challenge which is often difficult to meet. As long as the students are striving to adjust to a temporarily adopted society and accept some part of the new culture and its associated habits, they will face fewer problems related to socialization (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1987).

Adjustment for international students involves two social interaction processes. First, the students are socialized into the mainstream of American society and culture by learning new values, beliefs, and modes of behavior. Second, the students select a certain behavior that maximizes their adjustment in American society. Finally, most students are able to acquire the balance necessary to survive in the U.S. culture without losing their own cultural identity (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977; Crano, 1986).

International students in their new environment are naturally trying to "fit in," but problems that are common to most students cannot be ignored. Many problems are created by language difficulties, changes in dietary habits, unfamiliar climate conditions, new sets of rules for personal communication with unfamiliar dialects, life styles, and an sharply

reduced social status. Seeking housing, making new friends, and acquiring the necessary study skills and habits are all components of adaptation (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977).

Lack of command of the language is probably the most significant barrier to success (Hall, 1981). Not being able to express and to catch the cues necessary for understanding can lead to frustration and eventually to considerable nervous fatigue (Crano, 1986). No matter how well prepared a student is, learning is hindered by a language barrier.

Students' adaptation includes two components: adjustment and assimilation. Adjustment and assimilation into the academic and social environment of the American campus is termed socialization. One aspect of socialization is formal learning. Crano (1986) stated that through formal learning we can learn how to survive, i.e., to accommodate ourselves to our environment.

This survival can take the form of adjustment, which means coping with one's environment to the degree that one is "happy, comfortable, and finally free of problems (Crano, 1986, p.16)." It can also take the form of assimilation. Assimilation means interacting



freely with people from the host country and accepting their culture. Each student's personal assimilation is an illustration of a different degree of survival, dependent on the individual's desire to remain culturally bound or to cross barriers to absorb a new culture.

### **Role of University Advisors**

Dealing with the problems of international students first requires the correct identification of the problem areas by college/university international student advisors. The identification of the common problems related to similar cultural, historical, religious, and educational backgrounds is beneficial for the adjustment of students during their stay in new environments (Payind, 1979; Dalili et al., 1982). International student advisors can then use this knowledge to help these students adjust.

Many articles written about international student adjustment lead the reader to assume that a high percentage of international students are unhappy during their stay in the U.S. and leave the country dissatisfied. But according to McCaughey (1980), this

is not a true perception. He found that international students, in general, experience few serious problems and that they are pleased with their institutions and programs. It is encouraging to think that their negative perceptions can be removed because enough positive experiences have reinforced their positive view of education in the U.S. and the people living here.

This reinforcement should, at least in part, be affected by the interaction of international students and the academic community, particularly the international advisor. Though the problems cited may not become serious for some students, there are undoubtedly many who have at various times desperately needed support services. These students are far from home, and alienation, accompanied by feelings of loneliness in an alien culture, could affect on the students' attitude toward the U.S. and their studies.

To reduce the loneliness of many international students, more structure is needed outside the classroom (Dalili, 1982). The typical college student spends only 12 to 20 hours a week in formal classroom activities. Subtracting more time for rest, personal needs, and study, the students still have many hours

left to devote to "adjustment development" activities (Penn & Durham, 1978; UNI institute, handbook, 1989). A comprehensive education encompasses more than just class work.

The students, who are exposed to different living standards, governmental structures, individual freedoms, and family life radically different from those of their native lands, need to be involved in enrichment activities other than those which are solely academic (Dalili, 1982). These activities can act as a bridge to American culture and can encourage the development of positive attitudes toward American education for the international student.

### **Career Counseling and Return Adjustment**

Helping the international student choose and pursue the most desirable and appropriate career goals is a task made even more difficult by the uncertainty of the future of many international students. Some countries have experienced "brain drain" to varying extent; that is, students do not return home to their countries. But research shows that the majority of international students do return home after completing

their degrees (McCaughey, 1980; Dalili, 1982). They are expected to return home to help ensure that their countries become more developed.

The OPEC countries, in particular, have been suffering from "brain drain" but have employed intensive measures to create conditions in the countries which attract more graduates of foreign universities back to their native lands (Sully, 1985).

For developing countries, both short-term and long-term planning efforts are vital. While short-term goals for education are usually related to levels of literacy, long-term goals necessitate more intensive, coordinated efforts. U.S. colleges and universities have played an important role in these developments, but the future calls for a more comprehensive type of planning based on "international" community goals (McCaughey, 1980; Payind, 1979).

### **Summary**

The difficulties faced by someone moving to a different part of the world are often staggering. Most international students face the problem of culture shock. These symptoms can cause psychological barriers

that delay learning, improvement in language, and other areas vital to student success (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1987).

Lowering psychological barriers to learning and adjustment for international students is an important challenge for U.S. college and university services. If students are better prepared before they come to the U.S., if they are placed in an appropriate academic community, if they are guided and supported through the difficult initial adjustment period, and if they find the academic program stimulating, then they are more likely to adapt well during their stay in this country. The benefits of such success can extend beyond their academic experience in the U.S. As these students return home, they may go with positive experiences and attitudes about their time at the American institution and, about, America in general.

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